

Nice Girl by VerityR

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Summary:

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Nice Girl

Nancy Wheeler has always wanted more. More time to get ready in the morning, more clothes, more books to take out of the shitty public library. So, sure, she was the top of her class. But Nancy wanted to be *cool*. To have it all.

It came easily to other girls. Being the sort of person other people just... liked. That the right people liked, that was. Because it wasn't as if no one liked her. There was Barb, her mother, other people's mothers... Mike (on good days)... and... Barb.

The thing is, Nancy Wheeler was a nice girl. Always up for taking babysitting jobs last minute or doing her little brother's entire book report the night before it was due.

And for a long time, Nancy figured that was her lot in life: Nice Girl Nancy. Sure, you'd keep her around to copy her homework, but you wouldn't invite her to your party. Nancy wouldn't even *know* about parties until they were being recapped by her hungover homeroom classmates. She just wasn't that kind of girl.

But it turned out, all that? It was in her head. There was no social predestination. Kids who, in middle school, had been as socially helpless as she was, would come back from summer vacation, suddenly sitting with the right people, doing their hair the right way.

Could it be that easy?

(It was.)

Getting Steve Harrington to notice her changed her life, and it was only the third most difficult thing Nancy had done that day.

The best part of it was, she could still be herself. By day, Nancy was the nice girl, going to class and taking diligent notes. By night, she was shotgunning beers and sticking her hand down a boy's pants. And not just any boy. A *cool* boy. Who thought she was cool, too. Who wanted her.

It felt very, very close to having it all.

The thing she learned very quickly about cool people was that they were, inherently, not very nice people. But Steve was different. Or, he seemed different, at least. Part of her was always screaming, in a voice that might've been Barb's, of course he's nice to you, he's trying to get in your pants.

Nancy never really believed that. And if she was honest? That's exactly where she wanted him to be.

But when the world shifted, none of that mattered anymore. It seemed strange that it ever had.

Barb was gone.

One of Mike's friends, too. Will, Jonathan Byers' brother. She had always felt weird around Jonathan Byers, truth be told. It was that strange intimacy that came from interacting outside of school. Their little brothers were friends, was all. Jonathan might be in her basement, once in a blue moon, grinning apologetically, trying to convince Will that, yes, it *was* time to go home. Maybe she'd talk to him for a minute, while they waited for Mike and Will to finish their dumb game, exchange the most cursory of pleasantries. But, inevitably, when Nancy passed him by in the halls the next day, she'd suddenly become engrossed in her fingernails or her textbooks or her watch. And she didn't even feel bad about it, not really. Jonathan wasn't exactly easy to talk to. She could never figure out if he hated her, or just people in general. By and large, though, Nancy barely even thought about him, excepting those few awkward encounters. Why should she? They didn't really know each other. But their orbits were always colliding.

Even more so than usual, these days.

For a moment there, no one else on Earth could understand her better than Jonathan Byers.

Would he say the same of her, though? Nancy does wonder about that. When they start working together, almost anything he says surprises her. He's kind of funny, for one thing. For another, he

doesn't care what people think about him. Not nearly as much as she does. Which shouldn't be so shocking, or anything, but it somehow is. Nancy has never been popular, but she's always flown under the radar. Kids like Jonathan, who seem to go out of their way to be—well, not *weird*, but different—Nancy's always wondered why they don't just try and act *normal*. It's not forever; it's only high school. They must not realize how they come across, she figured. But Jonathan is so intentional with it all: the dark clothes and the photography and the weird music. How would it feel, doing things because you loved them, instead of treating life like a game you could win? Nancy didn't know that she'd be able to pull that off— the whole, screw-the-world thing. She couldn't help herself from caring what people thought of her. But it was still interesting to think about. Jonathan was... interesting.

And he's smart, too. He can keep up with her. They make a good team. It's horrifying and apocalyptic and a little bit thrilling and it's all over in under a week.

It hadn't really meant anything, of course. Her and Jonathan, working together. Just one of those crazy flukes. Like those mothers who can suddenly lift cars if they need to rescue their babies. Or like that guy who got struck by lightning seven times and lived. Something you're only capable out of a primordial survival instinct. That's the only way it can happen; life or death.

Nancy and Jonathan. It sounded strange. Wrong. If they're anything to each other, they're war buddies. Thrown together in the trenches. That kind of thing. No one else would believe what they'd seen. No one else could help who they were sorely trying to help. They needed each other.

(Though, did he really *need* to sleep in her bed? Did her hands need to linger that long, wrapping his wound with gauze?)

None of that mattered now. Because it was all over and Barb was still dead. Will was back, Barb was dead, and Nancy was short a best friend.

All Nancy really had now was Steve. Her mother seemed more fraught than usual these days, her father more withdrawn, if such a

thing were possible. And, yeah, it was easier to talk to Mike than it had been for months (years?), but there were an infinite number of things you couldn't talk to your twelve-year-old brother about, no matter how close you were.

Before, her and Jonathan had to stick together. They both had people to save. Now, he'd succeeded, and she hadn't. And, okay, maybe it wasn't as simple as all that. But that's how it felt. Especially since it was Nancy's fault Barb got hurt in the first place. Nancy's fault, all of it.

Jonathan was happy now. Just another thing Nancy couldn't understand. Even if there had been a second (a second, *tops*) where she had felt as if maybe...

But that was stupid. Though it shouldn't seem so crazy, Jonathan liking her. He certainly liked her enough to take pictures of her from afar. (Not exactly a stellar recommendation.) Maybe it was that Nancy didn't see herself as particularly likable.

Whatever. Even if he had... did Nancy even like him back?

No, that wasn't the question. *Why* did she like him back?

Nancy was supposed to like Steve. Steve, who had certainly seemed dangerous, once upon a time. The kind of boy that girls liked and parents hated, who everyone wanted but only Nancy had. The missing element that would transform her into the Cool Girl.

Nancy didn't care about that now. Was that why Steve seemed somewhat... superfluous? Or was it that, now that Steve was available, that they weren't sneaking around, he didn't feel *dangerous* enough? What kind of girl would that make her, if that were true?

"Another suburban girl who thinks she's rebelling." Wasn't that what Jonathan had called her?

That had been unfair. She wasn't like that.

If she ever had been, she certainly wasn't anymore. Because Nancy didn't care about being cool or smart or liked. And because Steve was her *boyfriend* now. He came to family dinners. He drove her to

school. Being with him didn't feel particularly rebellious. Steve had assimilated himself into the life of Nice Girl Nancy.

Maybe that's all this fixation on Jonathan was, because it had to be more than their shared secret. Other people knew, now. From the Chief, to Mike's friends, to Jonathan's own mother— hell, even Steve. It wasn't the two of them against the world anymore.

It had to be her, then. A catch-22 cliché: the more you try to rebel, the more stereotypical you become.

And wouldn't being with Jonathan fulfill that cliché, in a way? Was he just the badder bad boy? Or could it turn her into someone else entirely? The bad girl who shoots guns. The bad girl who doesn't care what people say about her.

It's all so tiresome. Nancy's tired of everything, these days. Herself, perhaps most of all.

So it was just as well that Steve had stepped into the acceptable boyfriend role. Nancy wouldn't have had the energy to keep up multiple personas. She could barely even focus on school. On pretending that any of this mattered.

The new normal, whether anyone would acknowledge it or not, was chaos. This quiet wasn't going to last forever. Wind was gathering around them, while they mistook the eye of the storm for solid ground.

For the first time in her life, Nancy wasn't getting straight As. Who could think about flashcards in a world where faceless monsters emerge from walls? Who could concentrate on lectures, knowing that other universes exist? That you had almost been stuck in one? Where, even now, your best friend's corpse was rotting, her family still waiting for her to come home?

The place inside Nancy that had always gaped with wanting slowly fills up with fear, without her even noticing.

This, Nancy thinks, even Jonathan wouldn't quite understand. He hadn't been there, to that other place. There was no safe, after that.

There was only numb.

Nancy holds Steve's hand too tightly in the hallways. It's his shoulder she cries on. He's apologized now a thousand and one times. She'd rather he drop it: the camera, the graffiti, the fight. He'd settle for her dropping the monster stuff. (It doesn't escape her notice, that all their fights are about Jonathan.)

Nancy stops crying altogether. And, after a while, those voices in her head that tell her to panic? Well, they're not gone, exactly, but they take up less space. Her life is underscored by an ambient thrum of dread. But she's fine— this is the new normal.

Against all odds, her and Jonathan are still talking. In school, at least. It's not as if they're best friends. But even Steve goes out of his way to be nice, now. They all sit together at lunch once or twice, before seemingly unanimously deciding it is truly too awkward to bear and dropping the idea entirely.

It might be her imagination, but Nancy thinks Jonathan is picking Will up from her house more often than he used to. Probably, it's Mrs. Byers being overprotective, too afraid to let Will bike home by himself. Part of Nancy can't help thinking (hoping?) he's looking for an excuse to see her.

Speaking of excuses— Nancy buys Jonathan a camera. She asks her mother for a ride to the mall instead of Steve. It's sort of her fault Jonathan's camera got broken in the first place, she justifies to herself. Though "got broken" is ridiculously passive, even for her own mind. It's her fault *Steve* broke it.

Nancy hides the camera under her bed for a month. She'll give it to him at school. Or drop it off at his house. Or keep it forever like some sort of crazed stalker.

Suddenly, it's Christmastime, which is almost inarguably the best time to give someone a random present. Nancy drops it into casual conversation with Steve, who handles the subject carefully, as though she might break. Though, this is Steve's baseline with her, so it's hard to parse. He eventually shrugs it off. After all, he did break the camera in the first place. Why shouldn't Nancy replace it? Water

under the bridge. A nice token of their forgiveness. Steve and Nancy, a real unified front. It's all very mature of them.

Nancy doesn't tell Steve what she was thinking when she bought it. She might not be able to explain it, even if she wanted to try. These vague, nebulous ideas of seeing herself through Jonathan's eyes—albeit, on her own terms, this time—well, they don't sound especially innocuous, even in her head. Nancy lets Steve think what he wants. Nancy doesn't say that she wants Jonathan to be able to see her. For him to know she wants it. Wants for him to look at her and see the things she can't (won't?) say.

But, no. It's best for all of them, if Jonathan doesn't read into it. He's happy now. He doesn't need the mess of Nancy's life. And she can't run from boy to boy, using them as puzzle pieces to form some perfected version of herself. Nice girl, cool girl, bad girl. It's all still Nancy. And she doesn't want to hurt Steve. She doesn't want to hurt Jonathan. She only wants to live her life without thinking too hard about it.

Because life keeps going, with or without them. Walls stay solid. Lights flicker without ominous purpose.

Who could want more than that? Peace. And soon, a New Year.

What was Jonathan to her? A boy she could hunt monsters with? (The first boy she ever woke up next to, a voice answers. The voice is ignored.)

Nancy has a boyfriend. One her mother likes, who drives her places, who's told off people who were cruel to her. What else could she ask for? What else could she deserve?

So maybe she isn't ecstatic with Steve. Isn't excited. Hadn't those been the impulses she'd been listening to when she let Barb die?

Nancy was safe now. Well, numb. No. Safe.

There was nothing else. Nancy couldn't want anything more.